

FUCKING WITH THE SYSTEM: THE RESIDENT

BY DORIAN DAWES



In 2000, Lori Harfenist launched a show on NYC's public access channel. The Resident was a radical, in-your-face approach to the news. Since then, she's gone on to become one of YouTube's original 75 content partners and a weekly journalist for RT Global News. Lori's bubbly personality and sharp wit makes The Resident attention-grabbing and entertaining, but it's her no-holds-barred questions and brutally honest journalism that create an informative, thought-provoking experience that's not something you'll see anywhere else. The Resident asks all the questions America needs, but leaves it up to the viewer to decide the answers for themselves.

What is the mission behind The Resident?

It started out as therapy for me—a way to vent my frustrations with society, then put it out there on TV and the web to see if anyone else felt the same way I did about all the crap out there. I had no mission or goal other than to amuse myself, vent, and be creative. Some of my first topics were completely frivolous, like stupid fashion trends. Remember when everyone had to wear a trucker hat? And now girls are walking around with feathers stuck in their hair? That kind of blind following drives me nuts. It squashes individualism and also looks fucking stupid. So those were the kinds of topics I started with. The response was positively overwhelming, and it was so awesome to hear that people felt the same way I do; so it drove me to keep on working at The Resident. It just became more and more important to me, so I started focusing on more important issues, ones I REALLY care about, like racism, social injustice, and inequalities in our society. So even though I never really sat down and thought about having a mission, I guess I have one, and it's the one that's been with me since I started railing against stupid fashion trends. That is, to point out the stupid shit in society that ultimately hurts us and takes away from everything humanity could potentially be. We shouldn't be allowed to get away with the stupid shit we try to pull, because we have more potential than that.

What separates The Resident from the mainstream news?

Money. Right now, I'm not financially beholden to any sponsor or investor, so I can say whatever I want, whenever I want, and no one is going to pull the plug. I hope to have a lot more money and backing one day, to have more resources at my disposal so I can make a bigger impact and reach more people. Also that'd allow me not to have to wear so many hats, like I could focus more on writing and less on lighting and sound and shit I don't want to think about. The thing is, even though not having a lot of financial backing and resources and a bigger reach sucks, the good thing about being independent for so long is that, when those things DO come, I'll have an established base and more of a voice in terms

of still getting to say what I want. I've worked really fucking hard for a long time on my own, so when the mainstream does come knocking, it won't knock me down, and I won't have to sell out. And if it never comes, fuck 'em. I just hope to reach as many people as I possibly can while I'm doing this, because every time I hear a new person say, "Maaaaaaan, thanks, I feel exactly the same," my soul feels a little richer.

What sort of criticisms have you come under in the past, and how do you deal with them?

The one valid piece of criticism I've heard consistently and have tried to heed, is that I should focus my work more and not speak to such a broad range of topics. When I'd go from fashion trends to immigration issues, it was hard for people to figure out who I am. I've since focused more on news and socio-political commentary as a result of that. As for the rest, fuck the critics, man. I've heard it ALL. Having even a modicum of popularity on the web makes you vulnerable to a special kind of crazy. People aren't talking to your face, so they have all sorts of bravado and confidence and say whatever the hell they want. At least one person a week writes to me to tell me to get more sleep because I have bags under my

eyes. Can I tell you, I am a health nut. I run five miles a day, I drink 70 ounces of water a day, I eat really great foods, and I sleep at least eight hours a night on average. I have fucking baggy eyes. It runs in the family. This is how crazy people are. I've had people write in to tell me they hope my father, who died of cancer a few years ago, is rotting in the ground. I'm too fat, I'm too skinny, I'm too opinionated, I have no original opinions, I'm too left, I'm too center, I'm biased, I don't do my research...I could show you a small sample of crazy shit I got just this week, but it might make you feel bad for me. Ha! Truth be told, they don't get to me at this point. Not at all. I can spot the crazy shit within the first line of an email or post, and then I just don't read it. I've formed an incredibly tough skin. It doesn't get to me emotionally anymore. I just think to myself, wow, that person is a crazy fucking asshole, another insecure or hurting jerk on the planet that doesn't deserve my time or thoughts. That's how I deal with it at this point. I just have no respect for them and move on. I mean, unless it's truly valid criticism, which I am open to, especially from people who actually know me personally, or from someone who approaches me with the respect that I give to people I don't know. It's just that every fucking moron thinks they have a valid point, and 99% of the time they don't. Fuck 'em.

What inspired you to become a journalist? What led to the creation of The Resident?

As I mentioned before, it was originally just a way for me to vent my frustrations about society, and as a way for me to create something. Being a journalist wasn't a goal, it just kind of happened. I had been working in advertising to pay the bills, and the pseudo-creativity in that business is its own special brand of awfulness. I needed to do something, anything, to keep sane. So our agency was having this big meeting where all the creative directors from





all our offices from around the globe were coming to our NYC office, and our creative director wanted to put together a funny video to show how creative our office was—this was in 1999, the height of Web 1.0, before the bubble. So our CD wanted someone to go around the streets of Manhattan asking people about technology to show how dumb people were when it came to the web. Like asking people what an MP3 was, or how many bytes were in a gorilla-byte, stupid shit like that. I didn't think the idea sounded particularly fun, but whoever was going to be the person who made the video was going to get out of the office for a whole day, so I signed up for it. Working in an office is the fucking worst, a death sentence for me. So I did it, and I loved it, and I killed it, and I was like...wow, I want to do that again. Like, I can't stand people, but when I talked to them on camera, something happened—I actually liked them and was interested in what they were saying, and it gave me hope again for humanity. So I bought a camera and just started having my friends go out with me and shoot. I had no intention of becoming a journalist, or for it to become my career; which is probably why I love it so much now.

Hunter Thompson once said that objective journalism is virtually impossible and nonexistent, do you agree or disagree? Why?

I totally agree. I think it's a no brainer, actually. People can't be objective no matter what, journalists or otherwise, because we are all walking around in our own little chemical soup, with our own little natural and nurtured responses, and we all experience life events from our own perspective. The best we can strive for is to constantly question ourselves and constantly try to see things from other people's perspectives. The moment you're convinced your way is the only way is the moment you become one of the bad guys. Like, you look at Fox News and they are so fucking convinced they are right and seeing things objectively and everyone else is wrong, and THAT'S what's wrong with them. They have such an obvious agenda that they'll follow into the ground, and that's just blatantly wrong. We are all subjective in our points of view, and that's ok, just as long as we acknowledge that and try our best to work around that to see as much of the picture as possible.

How do you feel about the constant barrage of celebrity-related news broadcast by the mainstream media? Is there a place on the networks for entertainment-related news, or is it all superfluous?

The world is filled with C students. I guess they need something to watch and focus on. I used to think it was fun to poke fun at celebrities too, but it got old, fast. The argument I most often hear, is that people need an escape, that the world is full of war and poverty and disease, so the celebrity-crap is a great escape and just good fun and that it's harmless. I think that's a load of shit, personally. You need an escape? Go read fucking Asimov. Watch the Discovery Channel. It'll blow your mind AND entertain you. The celebrity shit-storm is not an escape from the bad, it's just being lazy. It's junk food for the brain, and it's giving our collective mind diabetes. There's no fucking place on CNN or Fox News, or any other network that purports to be serious journalism for a fucking Kardashian story or however those idiots spell their name. Any news network that covers that shit deserves to have people tune out. That's what E! is for: the C students and lazy people.



The internet has not only invented a new form of celebrity as others have noted, but also a different kind of journalist. It's enabled those who might not have previously had a voice to have open communication with an entirely new audience. Do you think this is good or bad?

I don't think I have anything new to say on this topic, but it's both good and bad. It's good because it provides a platform to capable, intelligent folks who would otherwise not have access to an audience. It's bad because it increases the noise in our society to a whole new level. Most of the shit on the internet is a load of crap, and it's ingrained in a whole new generation this idea of Celebrity as all-important. It's the end-goal now. It's not what you're saying, but who's listening. It's not whether you have talent, it's whether you have an audience. It's mostly added a lot of noise. But people are still the same. Smart, thoughtful people will see through the bullshit, idiotic C students will jump on the idiot bandwagon. Celebrity is so highly valued now that it's actually lost some of its meaning, which is ultimately a good thing, I think. We're only at the tip of this cultural shift that technology has wrought. I wish I could live another 200 years, because the shift, that's only beginning now, is seismic. Our generation's reality is so based on a cultural relic, the culture before the internet, and so we can't possibly know the implications at this point, on the notion of celebrity or otherwise.

What are your personal feelings in regards to the relation between the American mainstream media and our country's consumerist culture?

One is Ronald McDonald's right hand, one is his left. They make unhealthy shit together. One pays the other, one spouts shit on behalf of the other. I don't really blame anyone for it; it's just the C student thing again. I think humanity has so much more potential than just short-term economic gain, but I'm not so sure most people have the capacity to hope or

dream of more. That was always the appeal of Atlas Shrugged for me, that the truly capable folks just yank themselves out of society to focus on creating something bigger and better for humanity and leave the C students to wallow in their McKardashian world.

Do you feel the bi-partisan system focus on politics in this country is harmful or beneficial?





It's awful, it's destructive, and people fucking love it. It's like a football game, our team against theirs. The issues don't matter. It doesn't even matter if you're from the town that the team is from. People just pick their teams and run with it. Of course it's harmful, it promotes thoughtless following. There are never two sides to an issue, there are at least three or four or 10. The media likes things in black and white, pitting your team against another. It has nothing to do with reality. I've always thought our politicians, especially our president, should be chosen by lottery. No one gets to run, just every four years a social security number is pulled from a hat and BAM,



you're it. It should be a job no one wants. It's a service. It's like jury duty. Fuck, I got called man, I gotta go be president. Fuck. There are no political parties; it's just a service you are compelled to do.

Imagine that you are given the ability to recreate the world as you see fit, and the only limits are your own imagination. What do you do? What's the kind of world you'd make?

Hahaha that's a really huge question; I don't even know where to begin! I guess I'll just say that I think people think in too short a time frame in general. Humanity should be focused on building shit for the next millennia. We should be focusing on putting things in place, not for our kids, but for humanity a thousand years down the road. Let's think of space travel and searching for what's out there and bigger questions about spirituality and astronomy and the space-time continuum. Let's find another dimension and see if it has answers to unlock the other 90% of our minds. People just focus on the span of their own lives. I'd like to see a world that focuses on much bigger pictures, bigger time frames, and bigger scales, working together as humanity. Not as Americans, not as Muslims, not as corporations: as Homo sapiens in the galaxy. That would be great. And if that were the kind of world this was, I think I'd be a total hippie in it, focusing on hydroponic vegetables or something. Ya dig?

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